BOOK REVIEW

CARL FRIEDRICH PHILIPP VON MARTIUS AND TEXT BY H. WALTER LACK. 2009. **The Book of Palms.** (ISBN 978-3-
8365-1779-9, hbk.). Taschen GmbH, Hohenzollernring 53, D-50672 Köln, Germany. (**Orders:** www.
taschen.com, contact@taschen.com, +49-221-20-18-00). $150.00, 412 pp., color illustrations, line illustra-
tions, 12½" x 17½".

When I picked up the book to begin reviewing it I was amazed not just because of its size and weight, but also
because of the quality of the production and illustrations. This large format book, over a foot by a foot and a
half, is a reproduction of Carl Friedrich Philipp von Mauritius's magnificent 19th century botanical study of
palm trees; Historia naturalis palmarum: opus tripartitum (Natural History of Palms: a work in three volumes),
published between 1823–1853. This book was the first modern classification of palms, including the first maps
of palm biogeography and which described all the palms of Brazil, and collated the sum of all then-current
knowledge of the palm family. TASCHEN has reproduced this book and Mauritius's incredibly illustrated
plates from a copy of his original work. The text was authored by H. Walter Lack.

"On 15 December 1868, Carl Friedrich Philipp von Martius (1794–1868), Professor of Botany at the Univer-
sity of Munich and director of the Royal Botanic Garden, was carried to his grave in a coffin covered with fresh
palm leaves. These were a reference to his groundbreaking Historia naturalis palmarum: opus tripartitum. At the
time, this encyclopedic treasury contained the sum of human knowledge on the topic, and included 240 exqui-
site chromolithographic illustrations, including landscape views of palm habitats and botanical dissections.
This epic folio was based on Mauritius's expedition to Brazil and Peru with zoologist Johann Baptist von Spix,
sponsored by King Maximilian I of Bavaria, to investigate natural history and tribal Indians. From 1817 to
1820 the pair travelled over 2,250 km (1,400 miles) throughout the Amazon Basin, the most species-rich palm
region in the world, collecting and sketching specimens. On their return both men were awarded knighthoods
and lifetime pensions.

In his epic work, Martius outlined the modern classification of palm, produced the first maps of palm
biogeography, described all the palms of Brazil, and collated the sum of all known genera of the palm family.
For apart from his own collection of specimens and notes, Martius also wrote about the findings of others.
Mauritius's folio is unusual in its inclusion of cross-sectioned diagrams, conveying the architecture of these
mighty trees, which central Europeans would have found hard to imagine accurately. Equally remarkable are
the color landscapes showing various palms – often standing alone – which have a simple and elegant beauty.
This famous work is an unrivaled landmark in botanic illustration and taxonomy."

The history of the book is interesting in itself but you need to see the illustrations to appreciate the full
scope of this publication. Three of the illustrations fold out to nearly four times the dimensions of the book
itself—24 x 33 ½ in. They are simply awesome in their size and detail. And did I mention intensity of the color?
This is a publishing event and a labor of love from TASCHEN. I applaud their dedication to the size and scope
of the original and the decisions they made during the production of this magnificent volume.

Prof. Dr. H. Walter Lack is Director at the Botanic Garden and Botanical Museum Berlin-Dahlem and Professor at
the Free University of Berlin. A leading expert in the history of botany, his research interests focus in particular
upon the consequences of the global transfer of useful and ornamental plants from the point of view of our
cultural history. He has also authored The Flora Graeca Story, Oxford 1998, A Garden of Eternity, Berne 2000,
Garden Eden, Koln 2001 and most recently Florilegium Imperiale, Munich 2006.—Gary Jennings, Botanical Re-
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